

## Resenha

### A gringo studies Umbanda: lessons for theory and method

**Um gringo estuda a Umbanda:  
lições para a teoria e o método**

**Un gringo estudia Umbanda:  
lecciones para teoría y método**

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HALE, L. *Hearing the mermaid's song: the Umbanda religion in Rio de Janeiro*. Albuquerque NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2009. 192 p. (+ xvi p.)

In 1986, Lindsay Hale – a doctoral student in anthropology at the University of Texas, at Austin – stopped off in Rio de Janeiro on his way to Salvador, where he intended to study Candomblé. At the urging of Gilberto Velho and Peter Fry – who pointed out that there was much to study in Rio, and that Salvador was “crawling with anthropologists” (p. 44) – he delayed his journey a few days.<sup>1</sup> He ended up staying in Rio. A friend of a friend turned out to be an umbandist medium, and his attention shifted to that religion. We can be thankful for these coincidences, as they led to Hale’s richly descriptive book, a highly engaging and eminently readable introduction to Umbanda.

Of course, “Umbandistas are by and large skeptical of coincidence... Things happen for a reason” (p. 37), and Hale makes it clear that he leans toward this perspective himself. The author’s own presence in the text is engaging and valuable. The title refers both to the signature sound of a

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise identified, page references are to **Hearing the mermaid’s song**.

particular cabocla incorporating in her medium and to a mystical or hallucinatory experience in which—“remember[ed] only as fragments of images and sensations” (p. 26) – Hale swam with mermaids. His book ends with a wish for the reader: “that you, too, in some distant way [...] might hear the mermaid’s song” (p. 161). His second chapter “tells of the paths of three people deeply involved with Umbanda” (p. 30): the first two are mediums, one of Umbanda branca (“white” Umbanda with more Spiritist/Kardecist than Afro-Brazilian characteristics) and the other of “the African heritage in Umbanda” (p. 31); the third “is not Brazilian, not an Umbandista, but perhaps more deeply touched by it than many who are. That would be me” (p. 31).

By taking seriously the lives of his informants and the voices of the spirits that they work with – and by making his own positioning clear – Hale has written the best and most accessible general introduction in English to the basic beliefs and practices of Umbanda, and especially to its texture and colouring as “lived experience” (p. 161). (Concone [1987] remains the best short introduction in Portuguese.) Notwithstanding his own comments at points, Hale’s focus on both a somewhat idiosyncratic centro of Umbanda branca and a more traditional terreiro of afro-brazilian Umbanda goes beyond many discussions in making clear that Umbanda is not simply an “Afro-Brazilian” religion to be lumped together with Candomblé: it varies widely, in ways that reflect issues of class and race in Brazilian society (ENGLER, 2012).

Hale’s book has three goals: “to place the spiritual beliefs and practices that I observed within the broader contexts of Brazilian culture and history”; “to locate Umbanda within the lives of those who practice it”; and “to describe this world or, rather, these worlds of Umbanda that so enchant, disturb, delight, and fascinate me” (p. x). The second and third of these goals are admirably met by detailed accounts of the biographies and beliefs of his informants and of the spirits that they incorporate, as well as, to a lesser extent, of the practices, spaces and artifacts at two of his four fieldwork sites. Hale’s writing is clear and engaging, and he leads the readers through evocatively textured discussions of a variety of themes: e.g., mixture as a characteristic of Umbanda that reflects Brazilian society; various types of spirits, especially pretos-velhos (“old slaves represent[ing] [...] generalized Afro-Brazilian ancestors” [p. 88]), caboclos (indigenous Brazilian spirits, for the most part) and orixás (powerful spirits that rarely if ever incorporate); and how ritual uses of blood and water demarcate white and afro modes or styles of Umbanda.

Hale’s discussion of caboclos, one of the most important types of spirits in Umbanda, illustrates his approach and results. He recounts conversations with various spirits, in tandem with biographical sketches of the

mediums that receive them. He focuses on interpreting these narratives, though with occasional descriptions of ritual: e.g., “much or most of their time is spent giving passes [Kardecist-influenced cleansing hand gestures], listening to problems, giving advice, and proffering spiritual assistance” (p. 101). Caboclos are interpreted primarily in terms of personal experience: these spirits are believed to mediate the orixás, and as such they serve “as metaphors through which Umbandistas experientially grasp these mysterious, forceful vibrations” (p. 102-3). Dona Luciana is an upper-class white medium who leads a small Umbanda branca group that meets in her apartment. The caboclos that she and her nephew and fellow medium, Ronaldo, receive are European, not indigenous, spirits. Seu Silva leads a large Afro-Brazilian *terreiro*, the House of Father John, where “most of the caboclos are Indians, but a few of them are cowboys” (p. 97). On this basis, Hale “suggest[s] that we look at caboclos from four interrelated perspectives: as mediators and symbols of nature; as vehicles for representing and mediating the orixás; as representations of a mythic Brazilian identity; and, finally, as signs of and for the embattled self” (p. 97). So, for example, to make sense of the unusual non-indigenous caboclos of the Umbanda branca group, Hale “suggest[s] that in this constellation of European entities we can read Dona Luciana’s own sense of identity” (p. 110).

I turn now to two sorts of critical comments. These detract little from the value of *Hearing the mermaid’s song* as an introduction to Umbanda. But Hale’s balance between richly detailed ethnographic work and general interpretive claims – placing Umbanda in its historical and cultural contexts – illustrates certain theoretical and methodological challenges that we face, as scholars of cultures other than our own. Because the book is so richly textured in its descriptive work and ambitious in its interpretive claims, it raises important questions about how to move from the former level to the latter.

The first critical point is that Hale’s treatment of variation within Umbanda is ambivalent. On the one hand, his research revealed Umbanda’s “aesthetic and ritual diversity”, that “there was no singular Umbanda, there were different Umbandas,” that “Umbanda takes many forms; referring to it in the singular masks differences as striking as day and night” (p. xiv, 159, ix-x). He recognizes the methodological challenge: “I cannot pretend that I achieved anywhere close to a thorough sampling of Umbanda” (p. xv). He correctly notes both that the main “axis of diversity” within Umbanda is between “Afro-Brazilian Umbanda and White Umbanda” and that the presence of esoteric currents complicates this distinction (p. 158, xv). [He does not add that the picture is further complicated by regional variation and by Umbanda’s interactions with a variety of other Brazilian religions, e.g.,

Jurema and Santo Daime, and by the emergence of new hybrid traditions, like Vale do Amanhecer.]

On the other hand, Hale presents a black-and-white contrast between white and afro-brazilian Umbandas. For example, in terms of their physicality, “at the level of style, Afro-Brazilian Umbanda and White Umbanda stand in stark contrast. In the former we can read an immersion in the senses, an embracing of the body, and an elaboration of material signifiers; in the latter, a withdrawal, a minimalization, an abstract and disembodied code” (p. 149). In terms of their relation to certain modern Western currents of thought, “the positivist, ‘scientific’ current that runs so deeply in White Umbanda places high value and invest deep faith in Western medicine” (p. 128). Most importantly, they differ in racial positioning: “in ‘White Umbanda [...] the orixás [...] have not only been divested of their identity as African deities but, as with all things that evoke Africa, pushed to the margins, silenced, washed white’”; “Dealing with [...] the depth and shape of the stigma heaped on Afro-Brazilian religion [...] plays an important role in how different Umbanda centers constitute their *mistura*”; “The history of White Umbanda has been one of systematically excluding those elements conflicting with respectable, middle-class morality and comportment” (p. 125, 68, 126). In sum, Hale does a better job than many scholars in noting the degree of internal variation within Umbanda, yet he gives a dualistic portrayal, over-emphasizing the extent to which afro – and white – Umbandas are unified types starkly opposed to each other.

The reality is more complex. Astute readers might infer this from Hale’s qualifications, but most would accept his black-and-white division. Umbanda has a spectrum of forms (BROWN, 1994; ENGLER, 2009). It is true that the spectrum of Umbandas has two peaks – white and afro, Kardecism and Candomblé-like – but variation is more prominent than is suggested by Hale’s generalization based on his sample of four contrasting cases at opposing ends of that spectrum. For example, some of the centros of Umbanda branca that I study, in the interior of the state of São Paulo, are very sensory and material, others much less so; some are pro-science and western medicine, but most are esoteric in their orientation, offering a wide array of alternative medical treatments vested in a critique of western medicine (e.g., favouring anthroposophic medicine, which has some prominence in Brazil).

The positioning of Umbanda with respect to race is especially complex. Clearly processes of “whitening” and “de-Africanization” are characteristic of Umbanda branca or Umbanda pura – in part through pragmatic approximation with Kardecism during the period of persecution under the Estado Novo (ORTIZ, 1999; BROWN, 1994). But this varies even among *centros* at

the more kardecist, white end of the spectrum of Umbandas. Moreover, a move away from African traditions was part of the original dynamics in which the religion originated in the early twentieth century and thus is characteristic of all types of Umbanda. Umbanda emerged through entwined process of the “whitening” of Candomblé, the “blackening” of Kardecism, and the rejection of indigenous spirits (*caboclos*) in Kardecism (CAMARGO, 1961, p. 34-5; ORTIZ, 1999, p. 4-45; BROWN, 1986, p. 38-48). Umbanda branca can be sharply contrasted with afro-Umbanda, but there remains internal variation within each: it is not that one Umbanda accepts and one rejects Africa, but rather that comparable and conflicting discourses of “Africa” play themselves out across the entire spectrum. Some centros of Umbanda branca have drumming and some do not; some *terreiros* of afro-Umbanda say the “Our Father,” and some do not. It is misleading, for example, to simply classify Umbanda among the “Afro-Brazilian religions” and to state that the “African roots of Umbanda are undeniable” (p. 59). This marginalizes Umbanda branca as a derivative form of the religion, fetishizing origins at the expense of actual practice. It makes just as much sense to call Umbanda a transplanted European tradition (emphasizing its roots in Kardecism) as to call it an Afro-Brazilian religion (emphasizing its roots in Candomblé): it is a hybrid Brazilian religion (with roots in both these religions, and with other influences, especially Christianity at a global level and various local traditions on a regional basis).

Race in Umbanda is certainly, in part, a reflection of social and economic hierarchy and exclusion, but it is more than that. Where candomblecistas have worked to claim authentic and legitimate links to contemporary religious practices in Africa, the “Africa” of Umbanda is more romanticized (as, to an even greater extent, are indigenous cultures in the figure of the *caboclo*). Both the appropriation and the rejection of African elements in Umbanda involves more ideology than reality. (Of course, we must keep in mind that “social representations are no less real than social relations” [FRY, 1995-96, p. 126].)

Hale’s interpretation of *preto velho* spirits offers the clearest example of the place of race in his conclusions. Because Hale looks at *caboclo*-narratives and *preto-velho*-narratives independently, he misses an opportunity to analyze their structural complementarity (see e.g., CONCONE, 2001). His reading of *pretos-velhos* is societal, where that of *caboclos* is individual (as noted above): “Symbolically, the old slaves represent [...] generalized Afro-Brazilian ancestors”; more specifically, their “narratives can be, often are, nuanced explorations of power and powerlessness” (p. 88). He recognizes that “Brazil is a land of *mistura*, of mixture” including “the problematical myth of racial democracy by way of miscegenation” (p. 58; original emphasis). But

he makes clear, at several points in the book, that he sees race as mapping neatly onto social and economic exclusion in Brazil: he treats as a unified phenomenon “the stigmatization that comes from association with *blackness and poverty* within a racist and classist society” (p. 62; emphasis added). The pretos-velhos are read as characters that “reflect, comment upon, and are imbedded in [these aspects of] Brazilian cultural history” (p. 157): the “historic misery [of the pretos-velhos] is akin to the contemporary misery of the very poor”; “the senzala [slave house] stands against the Big House, and it stands against the everyday savagery experienced by those on the bottom steps of the capitalist pyramid” (p. 91, 93).

We can applaud Hale as he admits to “liberal ideas” and as he expresses concern for the “poor and disenfranchised”, the “powerless [...] [whose] dreams die, asphyxiated by lack of opportunity, by structures that work against [them]” (p. 63, 105, 92). No one with moral and intellectual integrity can deny that Brazil – like the USA and the rest of the world to varying degrees – is rife with social inequality and that this tends to be strongly correlated with race. Hale’s general approach is to “‘read’ ideologies of race, racism, and antiracism in the ritual aesthetics and spiritual discourse of Umbanda” (p. xv); but the link he asserts between ideological dimensions of race and class is not sufficiently nuanced. This risks importing an overly dualistic frame of race relations from the USA. Peter Fry – a more brazilianized *gringo* scholar – reminds us that terms like “white” and “afro-Brazilian” tend to import North-American assumptions when applied by foreign scholars to the Brazilian context (FRY, 1995-96, p. 125). Hale’s interpretation of the senzala (and pretos-velhos) as a site of resistance to Big House capitalism comes at the end of a passage introduced by a note praising Gilberto Freyre’s *Casa Grande e Senzala*. But Freyre’s own binary is much more nuanced: his highly ambivalent nostalgia for a period of emotion-driven cultural mixture prior to a rationalizing, European process of modernization shows the Big House encompassing, not simply excluding, the senzala (with sexual violence as a dominant factor). After all, many pretos-velhos identify themselves explicitly as house slaves: speaking from a subaltern position within the Big House itself, and expressing varying degrees of colonial enculturation. Hale’s analysis is on target, but it would be closer to the bulls-eye if he more clearly distinguished – for analytical purposes, granted their entanglement – the dualistic reality of economic inequality from the more complex landscape of class-based appropriations of race-ideologies in Brazil.

The second critical point is that Hale does not spell out the theoretical or conceptual frame that allowed him to move from his observations and interview transcripts to his general interpretive claims. He emphasizes

narrative (the stories of spirits and mediums) and one aspect of ritual (its performative aesthetics). The sort of theoretical work that informed Hale's move to general conclusions based on these sorts of empirical materials is not clear. This issue holds special interest for students and scholars who look to this book for more than an introduction to Umbanda. At this level, the book is oddly ambivalent. Hale's reflexive, personal and subjective style is correlated with a hesitancy to present a detailed analysis of his materials: the book often seems more story than study, with occasional generalized pronouncements.

This reflects certain currents in anthropological writing. Hale rightly rejects "naïve notions of anthropology as an objective science" (p. 160); and, though not cited, Clifford and Marcus' classic *Writing Culture* (1986) duly appears in the bibliography. Various characteristics of social anthropology's postmodern turn are prominent: centrality of conversation to academic writing; emphasis on the contingency and flexibility of fieldwork; erosion of the boundary between informant and ethnographer; recognition of the multivocality of cultural worlds; emphasis on social action as the site where meaning is constructed; and, of course, a view of ethnography as subjective practice not as a technique for uncovering unmediated knowledge. This is reflected in Hales' agenda: "my goal has been not so much to 'explain' Umbanda, but more to 'read' it, to make sense of it, to interpret what I observed and experienced" (p. xii). (It remains unclear how or why explaining is opposed to reading, interpreting, and making sense, especially when Hale holds that "as an anthropologist my job is to explicate [...] social facts" [p. xii].) He explicitly refuses to offer any "conclusions," for two reasons: they "treat the subject as an object, dead, finished, immobile"; and "you [...] the reader [...] are quite capable of drawing your own conclusions, and I would not intrude on that private process" (p. 156).

Hale seems to want it both ways, to write both a reflexive postmodern narrative of other/self-encounter and an account of how the "social facts" of Umbanda reflect "the broader contexts of Brazilian culture and history" (p. xii, x). Despite his stylistic debt to the "writing culture debate," he is no radical constructionist: the "spiritual beliefs and practices I observed [...] are social facts, the products of historical forces and cultural contexts" (p. xii). The four assumptions that guided his writing are standard fare for explanatory/analytical approaches to the study of religion: religion describes the world "and how human beings ought to be within it"; religion is "practice, an arena for active doing"; "religion is something people *experience*"; and religion "always occur[s] within social and historical contexts" (p. xii-xiii; original emphasis). This sets out a clear analytical agenda, and Hale offers,

throughout the book, a series of general interpretive claims that reflect it: e.g., the points cited above on the meanings of caboclos; or his summative quasi-functionalist view that in Umbanda, “the invisible world is mapped onto the visible, palpable, chaotic, often painful facts of everyday life – thereby lending those facts meaning and grace” (p. 21). What are these if not conclusions? The fact that the reader has to scour the book to find them – rather than having them organized handily in a final chapter – does not change their status as general interpretive claims.

Whether drawn from classic texts or bootstrapped from grounded analysis of one’s fieldwork, theory is that which informs the step up or back from empirical materials to more general or abstract re-descriptions of or claims about them. *Hearing the Mermaid’s Song* is littered with such steps back, but the conceptual work that informs them remains largely invisible. Hale describes his case and pronounces interpretive opinions. He calls his approach “‘anthropological analysis’; what it boils down to is: this is what I saw, this is what (I think) it means, and why” (p. xii). The “why” part is not always clear. It is to some extent when Hale sets Umbanda in its historical context, citing, e.g., Carneiro and Bastide, and with Renato Ortiz as a key figure informing comments on the stigmatization of Africa in Umbanda branca, though more work with published sources would add important nuances to his account here.

The attempt to make sense of Umbanda in relation to Brazilian culture is more problematic. I know from personal experience – being, like Hale, a white, male anglophone North-American scholar who does fieldwork on Umbanda – that my acquaintance with Brazilian culture is seldom sufficient to provide a basis for conceptualizing my observations and transcripts. (A trivial example of gringo-bias in Hale’s book is the false assertion that “manioc flour accompanies almost any Brazilian meal” [p. 137].) As a foreigner studying religion in Brazil, I need to arrive at an understanding – or a set of models – of Brazilian culture and society not just by observing and talking to Brazilians in the contexts in which they find themselves, but by reading what Brazilian scholars say of their own country (granted that a distant, alien gaze sometimes has its own advantages). Social theoretical work on Brazilian society would seem essential for the ambitious project of framing Umbanda as a reflection of Brazilian culture and history, but almost none is cited here. Many publications on Umbanda and Afro-Brazilian religions appear, but none on Brazilian culture. For example, Roger Bastide and Roberto Da Matta are cited in passing on specific aspects of Afro-Brazilian traditions, but not for their broader analyses of culture and society (not that either of these particular scholar’s views should necessarily play a central role



in understanding Brazilian society).

Readers are shown little of the theoretical work that led from observations to general analytical claims. Along with Hale's dislike of "conclusions," this suggests that he shares, to some extent at least, a dysfunctional characteristic of anthropology's postmodern turn: rejecting theory as part of a quest for "experience-near" ethnography. Ironically, such reflexive attempts to avoid objectifying the other threaten to objectify the tools of our trade, by treating the distinction between theory and empirical materials – e.g., field notes and interview transcripts – as an absolute one. The line between informant and ethnographer is relative, contextual and contingent, but the same holds for the line between data and theory (ENGLER, 2011, 262-67). (On theory as essential to an experiential anthropology see HASTRUP, 1995.) The view that conclusions are fossilizing, objectifying claims fails to recognize that knowledge is constructed through small incremental steps toward greater abstraction and generalization, steps that are always relative, contextualized, and dialogical, never absolute. Hale's book is full of conclusions, as he interprets Umbanda through the lens of a certain model of Brazilian society; what is missing is a clearer account of just what model he is using and where it came from.

It is not that Hale rejects theory, just that he seldom shows it at work. He tells us that his "approach is informed by phenomenologists, such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty," that it "is also grounded in what the anthropologist Michael Jackson, following [...] William James, called 'radical empiricism'", and that his assumptions are informed by Durkheim, Geertz, James, and Weber (p. xi). One work by each of these scholars appears in the bibliography, but – apart from token nods to "disenchantment" and "thick description" – none play any visible role in the text. They do not inform analysis; they serve as a general background warrant for a "local, ethnographic, experiential, and personal" approach (p. xi). So, for example, one of Hale's influences, Michael Jackson, has analyzed the non-verbal encoding of knowledge in bodily routines, especially ritual, and this informs a claim that metaphor is central to alternative forms of medicine (JACKSON, 1989, p. 150-51). This could have provided theoretical leverage for Hale's analysis. Instead, he focuses little on ritual, and his brief general claims about the body and medicine are presented in black-and-white terms that foreclose more nuanced analysis (as cited above, white Umbanda is said to ignore the body and accept western medicine).

Methodological and theoretical quibbles aside, *Hearing the mermaid's song* is a wonderful introduction to Umbanda and a treasure trove of narratives, tracing fascinating parallels between the biographies of mediums and

of the spirits that they receive. It is beautifully and sensitively written, and the consistent presence of Hale himself in the text only adds to the book's ability to convey a sense of the experience of Umbanda as a lived religion. As a scholarly text, whose "job is to explicate [...] social facts" (p. xii), it is valuable – as it reads Umbanda in relation to race and class in Brazilian society – but it has some problems. We can draw useful lessons from these problematic aspects of the book's analysis, as we can from the inevitable limitations of any scholarly text. The main lessons here have to do with the scope of generalizations and the place of theory. Few religions in the world refract their social contexts to the extent that Umbanda does, especially in its internal variation. By emphasizing this – and in part *because of* the particular types of limitations in his text – Hale has written a book that is essential reading for scholars of Brazilian religion and, more generally, for those who seek to understand religion as a socially embedded phenomenon.

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